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ABSTRACT

The transfer to a new school or grade has been identified as a typical transition period for students that is usually characterized by declining academic performance and increased absences. At the close of the 1991-92 academic year 26% of 9th-grade students in a large urban high school were failing 50% or more of their courses. A preventive network of student assistance programs was designed to increase the level of available student supports within the social environment of the school and thereby reduce the number of students experiencing failure. The preventive approach attempted to reach out to a cohort of transitioning 9th-grade students (N=67) considered to be at-risk for continued school failure and dropout. Intervention components included: technological support; student-centered support; instructional support; community-focused outreach; school governance; and teachers' professional staff development. During the course of the year 39% of the 67 students targeted for study withdrew from the high school to re-enroll elsewhere. Records show that as expected with the transition from middle school to high school attendance figures dropped for this group, resulting in an increase in absences from an 8th-grade average of 19.1 to a 9th-grade average of 22.26. Overall, an analysis of grades for all freshmen showed that the programmatic efforts resulted in a reduction in the incidence of freshmen failure from 26% to 14%.

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DEVELOPING SUPPORT NETWORKS TO REDUCE SCHOOL FAILURE AMONG AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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DEVELOPING SUPPORT NETWORKS TO REDUCE SCHOOL FAILURE AMONG AT-RISK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

The transition to high school is often a difficult period of adjustment for students, characterized by declining motivation and underachievement. Unmet transitional needs lead to more serious problems that result in an increased incidence of academic failure and eventually contribute to school dropout (Felner & Adan, 1988). During transitions higher levels of stress are experienced that can increase one's susceptibility to maladjustment for prolonged periods (Goldston, 1978).

The transfer to a new school or grade has been identified as a typical transition period for students that is usually characterized by declining academic performance and increased absences. These problems, if left unattended, can become predictors of eventual school dropout. Particularly vulnerable during such school transitions are minority children, especially those that are from already highly mobile families (Felner, Primavera, & Cauce, 1981).

Problem

At the close of the 1991-92 academic year 26% of ninth grade students in a large urban high school were failing 50% or more of their courses. The purpose of this paper is to describe the subsequent efforts of the high school to reduce the incidence of academic failure among entering ninth graders and to evaluate the effectiveness of various intervention efforts. This paper describes the development of a preventive network of student assistance programs designed to increase the level of available student supports within the social environment of the school and thereby reduce the number of students experiencing failure.

The high school was located in an urban/county metropolitan area with an enrollment of approximately 1850 students. The school is one of five high schools in a moderately-sized district of about 33,000 students. Demographics show that of the total student population enrolled, about 82% are generally white and middle to upper middle class SES, and about 18% are generally lower SES and minority. In June 1991, 26% of 9th graders were failing 50% or more of their courses. The preventive approach attempted to reach out to a cohort of transitioning ninth grade students considered to be most at-risk for continued school failure and dropout. A group of 67 students failing half of their courses were identified as at-risk.

Preventive Program Components

Recognizing the value of an environmental perspective (Trickett & Moos, 1973), preventive support programs were developed and implemented throughout various dimensions of the school's organizational structure. The transitional needs of students have been found to vary across several areas consisting of routine needs, academic needs, personal needs, and social needs. Therefore, the school-wide programs were designed to assist at-risk students by making available assistance programs in instructional, personal, social, and family areas. Interventions included the following participants: students, parents, teachers, counselors, and community professionals, and included technological, instructional, school governance, and higher education programmatic components. The various elements comprising the supportive network of assistance programs are listed below:

1. Technological support
    - Voice Mail for homework and communication
    - Grade Analysis reported each 4.5 weeks
2. Student-Centered
    - Program innovation
    - At-risk monthly support group
    - University consultation
    - Extended school tutoring services
    - Student assistance team efforts focused on 9th graders
3. Instructional
    - 9th grade liaison/ombudsman faculty member
    - Inservice training
    - Flextime for counselors to increase availability to parents in pm
    - Interdepartmental collaboration & placement into English Arts
    - 9th grade faculty task force (monitoring & support)
4. Community-focused outreach
    - Parent Teacher School Association- Motivational Dinner
    - Orientations with families & students
    - Study Skills
    - Career Fair (2 years or less of college)
    - Mentorship with UK athletes
5. School Governance
    - School improvement cabinet (school leadership members)
    - Subcommittee on at-risk students
6. Teachers' Professional Staff Development

    In collaboration with university school psychology faculty, teachers

received inservice training in motivating at-risk students. They were encouraged to engage these students in their classrooms through goal setting and contracting methods, high interest curriculum, thematic instruction, and use of accountability systems and student self-monitoring methods to observe progress more closely. Issues concerning teacher misperceptions of accommodating student needs as equal to lowering standards were raised and discussed between faculty and administrators.

Results

During the course of the year, of the 67 students targeted for study, 39% withdrew from the high school to re-enroll elsewhere. Records show that, as expected with the transition from middle school to high school, attendance figures dropped for this group, resulting in an increase in absences from an 8th grade average of 19.10 to a 9th grade average of 22.26 (difference n.s.). Overall, an analysis of grades for all freshman showed that the programmatic efforts resulted in a reduction in the incidence of freshman failure from 26% to 14%.

A comparison of Fall semester grades and Spring semester grades showed a slight improvement in overall grade point average, with Spring grades being an average 0.14 GPA higher than the Fall grades. A t-test resulted in no significant difference between the Fall and Spring semester GPAs. Correlations showed a -0.45 correlation between Fall grades and absences. Spring grades correlated with absences with an even stronger -0.65 coefficient. As might be expected, the greater the number of absences, the lower the grade point averages.

Results from a focus group discussion and individual interviews with selected students revealed improved perceptions about self and more

positive views of the school as a supportive environment. Students also reported increased motivation to succeed as well to escape the stigma associated with school failure. Unexpectedly they did not mind being included in the large group for study. Some students reported feeling relieved that they were identified as participants for the monthly group counseling sessions. Others felt better when their teacher monitored them more closely and held them accountable for homework and class assignments. They reported feeling like their teacher cared enough to not let them fail ("I felt better because I knew Miss T. was not going to let me fail."). Others reported that as their parents learned of their school difficulties and knew of their assignments they set limits and provided more structure and support for academic progress.

Conclusions

Increasing numbers of students are experiencing difficulties during the transition from middle school to high school. This is evidenced by the increased incidence of failure among high school freshman. Using a preventive approach, intervention programs were developed and implemented throughout various organizational levels within a high school environment. The overall results showed a reduction of the incidence of freshman failure from 26% to 14%.

The results demonstrate that preventive program efforts provided at environmental and programmatic levels can be successful in reducing academic failure for students during the transitional year into high school. In general, social supports can be provided with little or no extra costs to the school, yet have a significant impact. Moreover a school environmental approach such as the one described can be adopted that avoids waiting for

students to require more intensive psychological service assistance.

Recommendations for future efforts involve more systematic efforts at gathering program evaluation data. Gathering more direct feedback from students, teachers, and parents regarding the value and effectiveness of various assistance programs. Suggestions to expand preventive transitional programs to include eighth graders from feeder schools earlier are being considered. Followup with the original 67 students will be conducted to explore the long term effects of the program. Currently, students do not receive assistance until after the first grading period, causing a delay in students receiving the help they need. A screening process for earlier identification and coordination of assistance is being developed. More information is needed about the attributions for current successes and previous failures of the students who made progress.

A key ingredient leading to the success of this program to reduce academic failure associated with the transition to high school was a multimodal approach, that encouraged participation at all levels of the organization. The interventions themselves were simple, low-cost, environmentally-focused, and treated students in normal socially supportive ways rather than viewing them as broken and needing to be fixed with intensive special education or psychological services. The limited, yet positive results of this high school's efforts demonstrates that dveloping a network of opportunities for students to receive increased social support during a transitional entry year into high school can get students off to a more positive high school experience.

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